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CONSOLIDATING PEACE IN CENTRAL AMERICA THROUGH AN INTER-AGENCY APPROACH TO LONGER-TERM NEEDS OF THE UPROOTED

Report on the Conclusion of the CIREFCA Process

(submitted by the High Commissioner)

I. INTRODUCTION

1. After a duration of five years, the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA) process formally concluded in Mexico City on 28 and 29 June 1994 at the Third International Meeting of the CIREFCA Follow-up Committee, comprising the seven convening countries (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua). The meeting, which attracted broad international participation and included Guatemalan refugee representatives, was hosted by the Government of Mexico, in its capacity as president of the Follow-up Committee, and was jointly convened by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNHCR, and the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General. At this event, the international community approved a "Framework for Action in Favour of Populations and Areas most Affected by Extreme Poverty, Conflict and Displacement" ^{1/}, as a new basis for coordinated action in the post-CIREFCA period, and also adopted a Declaration of Commitments.

2. The present document outlines developments pertaining to the conclusion of CIREFCA, especially UNHCR's contribution in relation thereto. It highlights the catalytic role the Office can play, with the support of the Executive Committee, in ensuring that the needs of uprooted populations are reflected adequately in longer-term development strategies and programmes. UNHCR is keenly aware that both the causes of and solutions to human displacement in Central America are intimately linked to the eradication of extreme poverty through effective development policies and programmes, respect for human rights, and the political will to resolve conflicts through peaceful means. For all parties involved, the final phase of CIREFCA is replete with valuable lessons on both the potential and the difficulties involved in ensuring a smooth transition from relief to development through operational strategies at the country level.

3. A central role in inter-agency endeavours in CIREFCA's final year was played by UNDP, which took over the "lead agency" role in the process in July 1993. It will be recalled that this role had been discharged by UNHCR for the previous four years. It is apparent from this experience that UNDP Resident Representatives have a vital role to play at the country level, especially in stimulating the involvement of key line ministries, such as finance, planning and social action, as well as other development agencies and institutions. Furthermore, the UNDP-led CIREFCA Joint Support Unit, staffed by both agencies, proved indispensable in providing and mobilizing political, technical and financial support for CIREFCA throughout the process. The challenge now is to ensure that the admirable work methods of the Unit are incorporated into core structures of both agencies when it disbands at end 1994.

II. THE REGIONAL PEACE PROCESS AND CIREFCA: A CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS

4. A distinctive feature of CIREFCA's strategy to achieve lasting solutions for the uprooted is its linkage with the broader political commitment of the Central American countries to secure a negotiated peace in the region. As evidenced by the adoption of the CIREFCA Plan of Action in May 1989 in Guatemala City, vital inspiration was derived from the Esquipulas II Accords of August 1987, when the Central American Presidents recognized that there could be no lasting peace without initiatives to resolve the problem of refugees, returnees and displaced persons in the region. Similarly, the pressing need to respond to refugee issues (especially voluntary return) has often provided fresh impetus to peace talks and processes in the region. This phenomenon was most recently illustrated by the breakthrough reached in the Guatemalan peace negotiations through the signing by the parties in Oslo, Norway, in June 1994 of vital agreements covering human rights verification and reintegration of populations uprooted by this 30-year internal conflict.

5. Within the overall framework of the regional peace process, durable solutions (either through voluntary repatriation or local integration in countries of asylum) have been attained through CIREFCA for the majority of Central American refugees; as a result, the assisted refugee caseload has decreased by over 50 per cent since 1989 ^{2/} and all formal refugee camps have

been closed. As at July 1994, a total of over 70,000 Nicaraguans, 32,000 Salvadorians and 16,000 Guatemalans had returned home under UNHCR auspices. Local integration has also been pursued successfully in countries of asylum, especially in Belize and Costa Rica. Obtaining durable solutions, either through voluntary repatriation or local integration for the 45,000 Guatemalan refugees in Mexico thus remains UNHCR's main outstanding task in relation to Central American refugees 3/. Key aspects of CIREFCA's approach in pursuit of lasting solutions for the uprooted include:

- Strengthening international protection and respect for basic human rights of the uprooted, especially through application by most States in the region of the broader refugee definition, tailored to the Central American influxes of the last decade, as contained in the 1984 Cartagena Declaration. In addition, the reintegration of returnees and the displaced in civil and political life has been facilitated through UNHCR's legal documentation activities. In El Salvador, for instance, UNHCR supported the issuance of over 1 million personal identity documents and the reconstitution of municipal registries destroyed during the war.
- Linking the search for durable solutions for refugees and returnees with efforts to address the plight of the internally and externally displaced. Since the displaced were estimated, in 1989, to comprise 88 per cent of the approximately 2 million Central Americans uprooted by the regional conflicts, this broader approach has proved crucial. Efforts to promote national reconciliation by targeting affected communities, comprising mixed populations of the internally displaced, refugees, ex-combatants and local populations, have generated innovative programmes such as the UNHCR-designed quick impact projects (QIPs) and the Development Programme for Displaced Persons, Refugees and Returnees in Central America (PRODERE), executed by UNDP.
- Introducing gender-sensitivity into CIREFCA activities, thereby stimulating the participation of women at all stages of project implementation as well as awareness of their basic rights. Fulfilment of this objective was aided by the Regional Forum on Refugee and Displaced Women in Central America (FOREFEM) initiative of February 1992 and by the inclusion of a United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)-funded specialist in the UNHCR/UNDP CIREFCA Joint Support Unit.
- Mobilizing significant additional and non-reimbursable funding, from both humanitarian and development sources, thereby alleviating the economic and social impact of CIREFCA populations on the affected countries. A total of \$ 420 million for CIREFCA projects is recorded for the period 1989 to 1994, including \$ 79.4 million channelled through UNHCR.
- Promoting consensus-building, dialogue and reconciliation between parties, especially through the various CIREFCA follow-up mechanisms, at regional and national levels. In this context, the

crucial role and impact of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has continued to strengthen. In Guatemala, for instance, NGOs participate (through the International Council on Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) and the World Council of Churches (WCC), along with donors, in an international support group created to facilitate dialogue and accompany repatriation movements.

- Engaging the United Nations system, especially the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General, UNHCR and UNDP in a coordinated effort to resolve the plight of the uprooted, within the overall framework of the Secretary-General's "Agenda for Peace" in Central America; this endeavour has underscored the inter-relationship between forced migration and broader efforts to secure peace, development and respect for human rights.

III. PREPARING THE GROUND FOR THE POST-CIREFCA PHASE

6. During discussions on CIREFCA at the Forty-fourth Session of the Executive Committee, in October 1993, key parties (convening countries, the donor community and NGOs) requested UNHCR not only to continue exercising its mandate in Central America after the conclusion of the process in May 1994, but also to become more involved in the elaboration of future strategies within which the needs of the uprooted would be taken into account. As a result, the Executive Committee, in its Conclusion on CIREFCA, inter alia:

emphasize[d] the importance of ensuring, upon CIREFCA's conclusion, in May 1994, specific incorporation of the needs of refugees, returnees and displaced populations into UNDP's post-CIREFCA strategy and, to this end, request[ed] UNHCR and UNDP to jointly convene an informal technical meeting, before end 1993, and to invite countries of the CIREFCA Follow-up Committee and the international donor community.

(A/AC.96/821, para 25(k))

7. Spurred by the Executive Committee conclusion, joint UNHCR/UNDP preparatory work to devise an appropriate post-CIREFCA strategy was initially entrusted to a working group which included the CIREFCA Joint Support Unit and key field staff of both agencies. This exercise resulted in a shared conviction that the situation of uprooted populations after CIREFCA's conclusion should continue to be addressed within an inter-agency framework, the key components of which would be the Secretary-General's "Agenda for Peace" in Central America, UNDP's sustainable human development strategies (at national and local level) and UNHCR's strategy of prevention, emergency preparedness and solutions. The need to diversify and augment inter-agency cooperation was also emphasized, especially with a view to forging links with UNICEF and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), engaged in vital strengthening of municipal health and water/sanitation programmes throughout the region, as well as with international/regional development banks which have prioritized the social sector in Central America.

8. Owing to the evolution in the regional situation in the past five years, both agencies believed that the conclusion of CIREFCA should signal a shift in emphasis, away from the primarily short-term interventions carried out to date. Henceforth, the needs of uprooted populations should increasingly be addressed as part of a broader commitment, especially by Governments, to social and economic development. This implied tackling critical poverty by targeting specific geographical areas in countries where the factors of human displacement, conflict, and extreme poverty converge. Moreover, it was clear that such interventions needed to be linked with national macro-economic and sectoral policies to ensure sustainability and to broaden efforts to decentralize authority and resources to the local level. A key element, taken into account during the preparatory work, was an analysis of donor perceptions of regional priorities and potential external funding sources, in the context of competing global needs.

9. Pursuant to the above-mentioned Executive Committee decision, the CIREFCA Informal Technical Meeting was held in San José, Costa Rica, in February 1994, with participation of over 120 representatives of the international community who endorsed the joint UNDP/UNHCR proposal and provided vital orientation on key issues, noting in particular that:

- There was a shared perception of the delicate transitional phase prevailing in Central America, where firm progress towards democracy in some countries contrasts with ongoing conflict and worsening poverty levels in others. Likewise, it was recognized that, whereas the main challenge at the inception of CIREFCA in 1989 had been to achieve peace, the principle challenge now is to ensure successful conclusion of the peace negotiations in Guatemala, and to consolidate peace in the region, with emphasis on sustainable human development.
- The "pending agenda" of the CIREFCA Plan of Action needed to be completed; this pertains especially to ongoing reintegration/integration programmes in the region, particularly for Guatemalan refugees, and for internally and externally displaced populations for whom durable solutions have not yet been achieved.
- National strategies and commitments, formulated through participatory processes derived from CIREFCA, were crucial to resolve outstanding humanitarian tasks and to tackle extreme poverty and the roots of social exclusion in the region.
- The different views in relation to follow-up mechanisms, especially at the regional level, needed to be reconciled with the agreed emphasis on efforts at the country level.

10. It was further recommended that an international meeting be convened at which the CIREFCA process would be formally closed and, at the same time, renewed commitments for the future would be sought from all parties. In preparation thereof, the various national strategies in the seven countries were elaborated by consensus between the key parties (the respective

Governments, the field offices of UNDP and UNHCR, and NGOs) through an intense three-month exercise, held from March to June 1994. In each national strategy UNDP specified how its country programmes facilitate strengthening of democratic institutions, design and implementation of human development programmes for targeted areas and populations, and the promotion of policies and structural reforms geared to social justice. Likewise, UNHCR activities in the field of international protection and promotion of durable solutions are spelled out within the context of the various national strategies.

IV. NATIONAL STRATEGIES: KEY TO PREVENTION AND SOLUTIONS TO REFUGEE FLOWS

11. The results of this exercise were presented by the seven convening countries at the Third International Meeting of the CIREFCA Follow-up Committee, held in Mexico City on 28 and 29 June 1994. Key aspects of the various national strategies in the post-CIREFCA phase were outlined as follows:

- Belize chose to address poverty and tackle pending CIREFCA tasks through human development at the local level, with emphasis on capacity building. In order to cope with the socio-economic impact of refugee and displaced Central Americans, representing some 15 per cent of the total population, the need for continued international support was emphasized by Belize. The Belizean Government undertook to study the problem of undocumented aliens and to consolidate integration of refugees.
- In Costa Rica sustainable human development strategies will emphasize poverty alleviation and combat environmental degradation in priority areas in frontier districts and in Limon province, where most of the CIREFCA target populations is located. The guiding objective to Costa Rica's approach is to achieve environmentally sustainable economic and social development.
- In El Salvador, priority areas, where both uprooted populations (returnees and internally displaced) and other war-affected groups (such as former combatants) are located, include the 115 municipalities targeted by the National Reconstruction Plan (PRN) and another 36 municipalities identified by NGOs. An integrated development approach, focusing on poverty alleviation, will be pursued. Special emphasis is placed on civil society participation in the formulation and implementation of these activities.
- For Guatemala, the recently concluded "Oslo Agreement" of June 1994, reached between the Government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Army (URNG) covering reintegration of uprooted populations, constituted a decisive step towards peace, the success of which would in turn rely on continued international support. For Guatemala, priority is given to addressing the needs of returnees

and internally displaced within the context of peace building, with the aim of promoting human development and political, social and economic rights. In this context, the consensus-building process initiated within CIREFCA at national level between the Government, NGOs, and the United Nations system, was of prime importance. Priority areas, covering 119 municipalities, identified as "strategic for peace consolidation", had been selected based on the coincidence of highest poverty levels and displacement.

- The national strategy for promotion of human development at the local level in Honduras will be applied in three frontier regions affected by the former presence of refugees and the displacement of the local population. Through national poverty alleviation strategies, programmes are aimed at overcoming high poverty levels and social exclusion in these areas and generating socio-economic conditions which encourage the return of displaced nationals.
- In Mexico, the Government undertook to maintain its policy of asylum and to guarantee protection to the refugee population in the country. In regard to Guatemalan refugees, pursuit of durable solutions, especially through voluntary repatriation, will continue; depending on the evolution of the repatriation process, Mexico will examine the possibility of local integration for refugees in the States of Campeche and Quintana Roo who decide not to return to their country. Mexico will reinforce national development efforts in the south-eastern part of Mexico and in the State of Chiapas, where refugees are settled and where extreme poverty prevails.
- The strategy of Nicaragua, formulated within its national reconciliation and rehabilitation plans, is consistent with the country's development priorities, as presented to the World Bank Consultative Group. Socio-economic reintegration of uprooted populations will be emphasized within the context of sustainable human development, promotion of human rights and broad-based participation. A total of 16 municipalities, in Regions I, V, VI and the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN), have been selected, based on high concentrations of the target populations and greatest outstanding needs still requiring donor support.

V. THE DECLARATION OF COMMITMENTS: LEGACY FOR THE FUTURE

12. The international community's endorsement of the new framework for the post-CIREFCA phase was confirmed in a Declaration of Commitments 4/ which sets out the specific commitments of the parties at the Mexico Meeting, highlights of which include:

- The Governments of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua, in addition to various other national commitments, undertook to concentrate sustainable human development efforts in priority areas (specifically indicated and

annexed to the Declaration) where human displacement is further aggravated by highest indices of extreme poverty, social exclusion, conflict and environmental degradation. The seven countries further pledged to reflect these priorities in national budget allocations and in their legal systems and institutions.

- The donor community undertook to continue providing political, technical and financial support, taking into account pending humanitarian needs and the transitional post-conflict situation in the region; support to local initiatives, promoted by both Governments and NGOs would be given special preference.
- The NGO community undertook to increase their presence in areas prioritized by consensus, to intensify dialogue with other parties, including Governments and to further coordinate their own efforts.
- The United Nations agencies and programmes (including UNDP and UNHCR) undertook to support, through their various offices, resources, services and programmes, the efforts of the Central American Governments and societies to address the "pending agenda" of CIREFCA, and the development of priority areas, in keeping with their respective mandates.

13. In addition, the inclusion of Panama in post-CIREFCA initiatives is confirmed, having been ratified by the seven convening countries. A Temporary Commission 5/ was also set up which, in a time-frame of 90 days, will propose relevant mechanisms to ensure follow-up and monitoring of the Mexico City commitments. CIREFCA was formally concluded at a closing ceremony at which statements were made by chosen representatives of the participating parties at the Meeting. On behalf of the seven convening countries, Ms. Rebecca Grynspan, Second Vice-President of Costa Rica captured the spirit of the closing ceremony by concluding with the following words:

....CIREFCA is an experience which has been unique in the world; it has shown that human rights, peace, development and attention to populations and areas most affected by conflict are intimately linked.

The Declaration of Commitments which we have adopted today proves that we have the political will, the experience and, as well we hope, the support of the donor community and the United Nations system, in order to continue building a region where the human being is at the centre of development.

With these words we wish to send a message of hope, of enthusiasm and of affection to the communities who have suffered the tragedy of displacement and who still live in the emergency of poverty.

Endnotes

- 1/ ref. document CIREFCA/CS/94/1 of 28 June 1994.
- 2/ At the CIREFCA Conference in Guatemala City in May 1989, official statistics regarding uprooted populations were: refugees (150,000), repatriants (61,500), internally displaced (872,000) and externally displaced/undocumented (900,000).
- 3/ For an update on UNHCR programmes in Central America, including CIREFCA, see EXCOM document A/AC.96/825/Part IV
- 4/ ref. document CIREFCA/CS/94/4 of 29 June 1994.
- 5/ The Temporary Commission comprises two members each of CIREFCA convening countries (Guatemala and Costa Rica), donor community (Commission of the European Communities and Sweden), NGOs (ICVA and Asociacion para las Migraciones Forcadas (ARMIF), and United Nations system (UNDP and UNICEF).